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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: THROUGH AOUN'S LOOKING GLASS: ARGUES FOR APPEASING SYRIA AND HIZBALLAH, BLAMES SINIORA FOR LEBANON'S PROBLEMS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)

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#### SUMMARY

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¶11. (C) The Ambassador and Poloff visited General Michel Aoun and his chief advisor Gebran Bassil on May 2. Aoun's perceptions continue to be radically different from U.S. views despite similar stated goals of a free and democratic Lebanon. Aoun argued that appeasing and building trust with Syria and Hizballah are the best ways to forestall greater Syrian involvement and Hizballah's military buildup, and rejected the argument that -- despite last summer's war and Hassan Nasrallah's belligerent 4/8 speech, *inter alia* -- his memorandum of understanding with Hizballah has failed to bring the group into the fold. The General continued to argue that he supports the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, although he has done little to support its establishment.

¶12. (C) Looking ahead at potential solutions of the political stalemate, Aoun was harshly critical of Prime Minister Siniora's latest initiative and told us he is planning to launch his own initiative, which will be a compromise between all parties and will prioritize and set deadlines for needed reforms. Aoun appears convinced that March 14 leaders, and specifically Siniora, are the root of Lebanon's problems, and continues to argue that Lebanon is in deadlock because the GOL is unwilling to compromise. Aoun insisted that the current parliamentary majority cannot be permitted to elect Lebanon's next president. End summary.

DIVERGENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE SAME PROBLEMS:  
SYRIA, DISARMAMENT, TRIBUNAL, AND PALESTINIANS

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¶13. (C) General Aoun's perceptions continue to be radically different from U.S. views, Ambassador Feltman and Poloff learned when they visited Aoun and his son-in-law and chief advisor Gebran Bassil on May 2. Last week in an *As-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper article the General condemned foreign (read U.S.) interference, while arguing that Lebanese problems with Syria ended with Syria's withdrawal. Asked about the interview, Aoun clarified that Syria is still a problem. But to address the problem, Lebanon should appease Syria and remove any pretext for Syria to move against Lebanon. That will prove more effective than confronting Syria, as the U.S. and March 14 prefer. Instead, Aoun is trying to build enough trust between the two nations to allow the demarcation of borders and establishment of diplomatic

relations. Syria will always want to control Lebanon, the General argued, but we can limit the problem and forestall another direct Syrian intervention by "soothing" its regime.

¶ 14. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's argument that in the year and two months since Aoun's memorandum of understanding with Hizballah, appeasement has not softened the terrorist organization or brought its ministers back into the government, Aoun accused March 14 leaders of baiting Hizballah and cited Hizballah's refusal to use violence since the July war despite "provocation" from March 14 as proof that his approach is working. Building trust and incorporating Hizballah into the government is a better way to disarm the group than isolating and confronting it, he argued. Once the issues of Shebaa Farms and the Lebanese prisoners held in Israel are resolved and Lebanon makes progress as part of a regional plan toward normalization or peace with Israel, Hizballah will have no need or justification for its weapons. Asked how Aoun interpreted Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's belligerent 4/8 address, Aoun blamed Druse leader Walid Jumblatt for provoking Nasrallah. What do you expect Nasrallah to do, Aoun asked, when Jumblatt attacks Nasrallah every day.

¶ 15. (C) Aoun explained his claim to support Special Tribunal but failure to act to support its establishment by blaming the Prime Minister; "Siniora never asked for my help," the General told us. He reiterated his arguments that a tribunal would reinforce the justice system and be a deterrent against future political assassinations. "I can't be against the tribunal, because I'm afraid too," Aoun confided. However, he claimed politicization, first by the UNIIC's first commissioner Detlev Mehlis and since his departure by March 14 politicians, has diminished popular support for the tribunal. Furthermore, he explained, no Lebanese politician

BEIRUT 00000622 002 OF 003

has a clear conscience, and the idea that all crimes can be related to the first can be interpreted in many ways, and concluded by stating the open-ended nature of the tribunal is "frightening."

¶ 16. (C) On the issue of the Palestinians, the Ambassador refuted Aoun's recent claims that the U. S. supports giving Lebanese citizenship to the 400,000 predominantly Sunni Palestinians in Lebanon. This issue is not under discussion, the Ambassador insisted; when Israeli-Palestinian talks progress to the point when refugees can be discussed, Lebanon's special concerns will be taken into account. Aoun explained that "intelligence papers" from a 2000 meeting at Rafiq Hariri's home showed that Hariri's advisors had sought to naturalize Palestinians in exchange for unspecified debt forgiveness. Aoun maintained that the only way to end the deep popular fear of the Palestinians is enabling the Palestinian Authority to issue passports to Palestinians resident in Lebanon.

AOUN CRITICIZES SINIORA'S,  
BUT TOUTS HIS OWN INITIATIVE

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¶ 17. (C) Looking forward at potential exits from the political deadlock, Aoun was dismissive of Siniora's proposal that Lebanese parties build on areas of existing national consensus to build a new "17-13" cabinet. Instead, Aoun asserted that he was preparing his own initiative, which he will announce next week and which will be a compromise between all parties and will prioritize and set deadlines for needed political changes. (Note: Poloff will follow-up with Bassil to obtain further details on the plan. End Note.)

¶ 18. (C) The Ambassador questioned Aoun's recent call for the Lebanese to directly elect their next president, rather than allowing Parliament to do so, as the constitution specifies. The Ambassador asked how could Aoun expect to pass a constitutional amendment to change the election rules if the

parliament can't even convene? "If we agree, we'll meet," Aoun flatly replied. We cannot let this majority elect a president, the General argued, because the government lost its legitimacy by dissolving the constitutional council. Had the constitutional council been able to hear the challenges arising from the May-June parliamentary elections, then the March 14 movement might have found itself in the minority. (Note: Aoun claimed that 11 MP races were challenged. Had the constitutional council decided seven races in favor of Aoun and his pro-Syrian allies, then the March 14 movement, then with 63 MPs, would indeed be in the minority in the 128-seat house. End note.)

¶9. (C) Aoun appears convinced that uncompromising March 14 leaders, and specifically Siniora, are the root of Lebanon's problems. A recent FPM website article blamed the GOL for not settling the Shebaa Farms issue, and Aoun explained that the GOL has been too aggressive toward Syria and -- repeating his formula of appeasement -- should instead be creating a positive atmosphere and a track record of honestly reporting what promises leaders make and then holding them to their commitments. (Note: Over lunch with the Ambassador on April 30, Aoun bloc Member of Parliament Farid al-Khazen explained that Aoun detests Siniora more than Hariri or Jumblatt as a result of Cabinet formation differences in July 2005. At that time, Aoun lunched at Hariri's residence, where he and Saad allegedly agreed that Aoun would receive four Cabinet portfolios. Siniora, however, "went behind Saad's back" to make a deal with Lahoud to bring in four Lahoud appointments (Elias Murr, Charles Rizk, Tariq Mitri, and Yacoub Sarraf) instead. Aoun, feeling betrayed by Siniora, has not forgiven the Prime Minister and believes he is untrustworthy, according to al-Khazen. Our recollection of the cabinet formation negotiations is slightly different -- we think Aoun was only promised two ministries -- but Khazen has provided a plausible explanation as to why Aoun becomes so venomous when Siniora's name comes up. End Note.)

#### PSP KILLINGS

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¶10. (C) In passing, Aoun criticized rumors that Hizballah might have used the Chammas family, accused of killing two youths whose families were affiliated with Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party last week, to avenge the murder of a Hizballah supporter in the January 25 clashes between

BEIRUT 00000622 003 OF 003

government supporters and the opposition. Instead, Aoun claimed the Chammas family is not sympathetic to Hizballah, and implied that an unspecified intelligence service was responsible for the killings. When the Ambassador tried to press him on which intelligence service -- given Aoun's implication in the As-Sharq al-Awsat interview that it might have been the U.S. or Israel (as Aoun linked the murders to those who allegedly want to settle Palestinians permanently in Lebanon) -- Aoun demurred. We must wait for the investigation, he said.

#### BASSIL BACK AT WORK

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¶11. (C) Aoun's son-in-law and chief advisor Gebran Bassil has recovered from a serious car accident in Nigeria in February and is back at work, perhaps partially explaining the upbeat if divergent tone of the meeting. Aoun and Bassil noted that "all parties except one" -- the Lebanese Forces -- had called to express concern and offer support after the accident. Saad Hariri offered to fly Gebran home on his private plane, and the accident precipitated a resumption of contact between the General and Amine Gemayel for the first time since the assassination of Pierre Gemayel.

#### COMMENT

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¶12. (C) At a personal level, Aoun was friendlier than usual. But, setting aside Hizballah's Islamic revolutionary rhetoric, it is difficult to imagine a strategy for the way forward in Lebanon that is more at odds with our own vision than Aoun's: the General advocates appeasing Syria and Hizballah, while battling Siniora and the March 14 majority in what Aoun seems to see as an existential confrontation. We are always struck by the sharp discrepancy between what his followers and MPs tell us privately -- that Aoun is pro-American and a figure of moderation -- and what Aoun himself says. The Aoun we meet in person is a far different, and more frightening, character than the one described to us by MPs Ibrahim Kanaan, Ghassan Moukheiber, and Farid al-Khazen. We have seen no signs of the potentially constructive role that the MPs report hopefully (and with increasing shrillness) that Aoun allegedly wants to play.

¶13. (C) Aoun's insistence that "the so-called majority" cannot elect a president, combined with his public call for direct elections of the president, is an ominous indication that he willingly accepts chaos when President Emile Lahoud's term ends in November. Putting aside the substance of the issue, at a practical level, it is impossible to imagine how Aoun's two solutions (either early legislative elections under a new, "fair" election law -- his previous preference -- or, now, a constitutional amendment to allow a one-time popular vote for the presidency) could be implemented. Either option would require cabinet approval of legislative measures followed by parliamentary ratification. Aoun and his pro-Syrian allies do not recognize the cabinet, Speaker Berri won't call the parliament to session, and Aoun doesn't have the votes in parliament to approve his initiative. (Many Christians fear Aoun's proposal, which would have the practical impact of permitting Lebanon's Muslims to elect its Christian president. And many Muslims dislike Aoun's proposal because it would make the Christian president, elected by the people, an unusually strong figure in Lebanon's delicate confessional balance. One of the results of Lebanon's civil war settlement was a dilution of the power of the presidency, a Taif reform Aoun's initiative would reverse.)

¶14. (C) One would like to think that, by advocating an impossible-to-implement initiative, Aoun is simply positioning himself to be in a stronger spot for the eventual compromise over the presidency that will come. But that would indicate that Aoun learned his lesson in 1988-90 that uncertainty regarding the presidential succession is disastrous for Lebanon and for Aoun personally. We doubt that is the case. Our working assumption at this point is that Aoun still prefers chaos to any scenario by which he is denied the presidency. We can only hope that his MPs and advisors begin to realize the dangerous course the General is steering.

FELTMAN